



A Welcoming Congregation: The Story of Belmont United Methodist Church

by Eric Patton

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Belmont United Methodist Church, a local congregation made up of about 2000 members, myself being one of them, just passed the following language for a statement of welcoming:

“We believe every person is of sacred worth and created in God’s image. We commit to Jesus’ example of inclusive love, care, and intentional hospitality with persons of every race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, faith story, physical or mental ability, economic status, or political perspective. We respect our diversity of opinion and expressions of faith. Therefore, as God loves us, so let us love and serve in the name of Christ.”

When gay people look for a church, often times it is hard to find one we feel comfortable in. I know, personally, when I moved to Nashville, I looked for clues on several church websites to see if they would be welcoming of a single gay man.

I grew up in Church and attended nearly every Sunday. When I came out of the closet, my religion was never something I wanted to leave behind. It was during a trip to Washington, DC, that I learned what a welcoming, reconciling church was and that there were actually people who believed that God loved gay people. From that moment, I knew the reconciling ministry was going to be something I needed to focus on. I never dreamed I would get to be a small part of another church coming to the same conclusion I did, that Jesus loves everyone, including gays. In the year I have been in attendance, I have witnessed a congregation of mostly straight middle aged to older adults, many with rather “traditional” families, decide that it was the right thing to do to start formally welcoming people who identify as LGBT into their congregation.

What is a reconciling ministry?

Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) is a global organization of United Methodists who believe that everyone has a place at the table of God. Their mission statement is:

“Reconciling Ministries Network mobilizes United Methodists of all sexual orientations and gender identities to transform our Church and world into the full expression of Christ’s inclusive love.”

The group advocates for social justice in regards to LGBT matters in the United Methodist Church. Local congregations and churches usually join RMN after making statements of welcome so they can work alongside the network, giving the group stronger support within the church as a whole.

How it began:

The Reconciling Committee at Belmont (BUMC) began in 2005. A retired missionary to Africa, Dot Anderson, recommended to the Outreach Committee that Stephen Mallet and Bill Harkey attend a conference at Lake Junaluska near Ashville, North Carolina. The bi-annual conference, “Hearts on Fire,” was a Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) event. North Carolina was chosen in an attempt to make inroads in the Southeast.

Even though Belmont once touted thirty different cultures were represented in its membership, some of the congregational leaders thought they might not be doing enough for the gay community. When Stephen attended the conference, he discovered that was certainly the case.

“I cried through the whole four day weekend. Never had I experienced such (...) words of welcome that were so affirming and inclusive of everyone,” Stephen told me. He was so moved that he came back and began what is now the Reconciling Committee at Belmont.

What does a welcoming statement do?

A statement of welcome is basically a statement of intent. In essence, it’s used to do two things. The first is to let people who visit Belmont know right off hand that we do welcome them whoever they are and that they can feel comfortable being in worship with us. Secondly, it’s used to keep the congregation itself honest as a reminder that we are supposed to be doing this; reminding us that it is our job to make people welcome and take steps to make sure that it is genuine. It is a covenant in that sense, that it’s something has to be lived up to. It’s something that’s beginning to be seen all around the nation. United Methodist churches especially are trying to be a little more open minded when it comes to members of all diversities.

What took so long?

The current Methodist Book of Discipline, the governing document of the Methodist Church, says:

“The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”

That line and others like it in the past were a big stumbling block.

The United Methodist Church took a harder line than Belmonters did. The topic was just skipped over for most of them. These are straight people who are somewhat unaffected by the struggles of gay people trying to be accepted in churches. It was never an act of intentional malice, it was indifference. They thought by just being happy, nice folks that they were doing enough to be welcoming to everyone, including the LGBT community.

Then, a new associate pastor came to the church named Pam Hawkins. Both Louis and Stephen describe her as the gas to the flame.

“Pam created an atmosphere where church members knew the conversation was real,” said Stephen. Once she started using the following greeting, people started to really change.

“No matter where you have come from and no matter where you are going...
No matter what you believe or doubt...
No matter what you are feeling or just not feeling...
No matter what you have or don't have...
And no matter whom you love...
All of you is welcomed into this community of faith by a God who loves you, who knows you
by name, and who wants a personal relationship with you.
Thanks be to God - Amen!”

The Reconciling Ministry Team took that and ran. They started showing films like “For the Bible Tells Me So,” things they had done before, but now had more interest in them. Listening sessions, meetings that were formed to talk about the congregations feelings on LGBT matters, started having wide attendance. Shortly after that, a book was published called “Our Stories: Welcoming Voices From Belmont United Methodist Church.” Several members of the church, including myself, wrote personal stories of why we were reconciling Methodists.

It wasn't long before the church started having more meaningful discussions, eventually adopting a whole new strategic plan, used as a guideline as to how we function as a church, that included the welcoming statement posted at the beginning.

Louis Jordan, now Co-Chair of the Reconciling Committee at BUMC, said “These things take a long ‘gestation’ period. Could we have pushed the welcoming statement faster and harder? Probably. But, in the end I think the longer path is probably a better path.”

Stephen Mallet summed it up best, “Probably more hearts and minds were changed in the process.” Even though he was agitated it took so long, he was happy that, in the end, people really had changed their mind, instead of the issue being forced through and done quickly, with people having their feelings hurt in the process. There was not just a change in rules, but the change came because everyone agreed on it.

Where we are today:

Belmont passed the welcoming statement on October 6, 2013 at the Administrative Board meeting. There was a long discussion about the topic, but it was a nearly unanimous decision. Louis Jordan's greatest fear, he told me, was that no one would speak. "I wanted there to be some healthy discussion. I think what's just as important as being a welcoming church, is that we're a community that accepts diversity on all sides."

In a church, on a topic as controversial as homosexuality, it is important that everyone is pretty well on the same page. Most that spoke that day were in complete support of the movement, except for a few when it came to joining the national organization, RMN. It was decided to pass the welcoming statement, but leave RMN for another day.

The reasoning behind postponing that decision was a fear of being a part of a national organization and committing something we, as a whole congregation, may not be ready for. There seemed to be a bit of confusion that joining RMN would somehow make us lose some sort of decision making, which is false. The three things required to affiliate and register with RMN (having a welcoming statement inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity, put it on the bulletin, and donate \$250 annually to the organization) would basically just put us on their website to advertise that we have the welcoming statement in the first place. The organization supports marriage equality and the ordination of gay clergy. It is something that most of the church would agree with, but the Reconciling Team decided, much like the decision with the Welcoming Statement itself, it is better to wait and take the time to discuss the topic fully before taking a vote.

Sunday, December 8, a gay couple that has been in attendance for a few months joined the church together. They Reconciling Team gathered around them as the ceremony was performed. It wasn't a big scandal. No one was angry about it. If you weren't thinking about it, it could have easily been just any other couple joining Belmont.

At the last meeting of the Reconciling Team, we were placing stickers of the welcoming statement onto the "Our Stories" books, coming up with ideas how to have a fundraiser for local LGBT organizations, how to make sure visitors are welcomed when they come, how a few of the ladies are going to get together and make rainbow stoles for the pastors to wear at the next conference, and other things that we look forward to doing with the church.

The team is still eager to join RMN.

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For more information on Belmont United Methodist Church and its reconciling ministry, visit

<http://www.belmontumc.org/index.php/ministries/reconciling-ministries>

Or visit us at the corner of 21st Avenue and Acklen in Hillsboro Village, Nashville, TN.